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Some state furniture seems far from frugal

By Rebecca Walsh

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State Administrative Services Director D'Arcy Dixon Pignanelli doesn't remember much about the car accident 10 years ago.

A hit-and-run driver smashed her bike and Pignanelli's back in the summer of 1995. She limped home with no memory of the impact. But the pain is constant.

So after months of shifting to find a comfortable spot in her traditional state office chair and weeks of physical therapy for her tingling arms and migraine headaches, state risk managers stepped in last May and helped her pick out a \$2,000 chair at the Relax the Back Store.

"The chair has made a big difference," Pignanelli said.

Pignanelli's black leather chair is just one of many pieces of furniture purchased in the past year as state workers vacated the 91-year-old Capitol for construction and moved into two new office buildings. A review of invoices obtained through an open-records request shows the wave of redecorating ranges from the \$600,000 bill to outfit the offices of legislative researchers, fiscal analysts and attorneys to a \$7 Wal-Mart floral arrangement that now adorns the Governor's Office.

Many of the dozens of chairs and desks and filing cabinets and bookcases replace stapled-together fixtures from years ago. But other bills might make taxpayers shift in their own seats - a \$1,487 flat-screen TV monitor in the administrative services conference room, \$20,000 to frame Senate president and member portraits and the \$6,000 tab for each legislative staffer's mahogany-colored cubicle.

"These are the kinds of visible trappings of office that will catch the average citizen's eye," said Pete Sepp, spokesman for the National Taxpayers Union. "The average citizen may not know how much it costs to set up a division of motor vehicles. But they can almost immediately understand" the cost of furniture.

For years, state workers were scavengers, picking over the castoffs of their predecessors. When the Supreme Court and attorney general's staff moved out of the Capitol, other state employees claimed the best hand-me-down furniture. But even those pieces were banged up and broken. Many staffers used tables rather than desks.

"It was government garage sale furniture. We got furniture catch as catch can," said Bryant Howe, assistant director of the Office of Legislative Research and General Counsel. He grabbed a bookcase from the Supreme Court offices.

But the scavenging is largely over. The \$200 million Capitol restoration project has given many a reason to buy new trappings. For legislative staff, who will remain in the new west building when the Capitol reopens, the move meant all-new desks and bookcases and filing cabinets in rich mahogany tones.

"Putting metal folding chairs into those facilities just didn't make sense," said Senate President John Valentine.

The state has an exclusive contract with Haworth and Herman Miller to provide interlocking cubicles and office components compatible with the historical furniture that will fill the Capitol. About one-third to half of the new Capitol furnishings will be made by prisoners.

"We've taken the position that we want the furniture to be complementary but subservient to the Capitol. We ought to follow that theme," Capitol Architect David Hart said. "We've tried to stay as consistent with the Capitol as we can."

Besides historical-looking furniture, many state offices are buying purely functional, but pricey, furniture and electronics.

The Attorney General's Office replaced several filing cabinets - at an average of \$500 each - bought four "twin-ear listening devices" and several attorneys requested \$673 Herman Miller office chairs. Some grants were used to buy handheld organizers and printers.

The state Tax Commission paid \$6,000 for 20 chairs for the commissioners' offices. Environmental Quality Director Dianne Nielson got a new \$412 phone and a \$399 BlackBerry personal digital assistant.

House Speaker Greg Curtis inherited his couch and armchairs - reupholstered in faux black leather - from former House Speaker Marty Stephens. Stephens approved the nearly \$5,000 bill. Curtis isn't sure he would have picked the man-made fabric.

"These are like sitting on inner tubes," Curtis said.

Upstairs in the Senate, members have furnished their offices, lounge and hallways with RC Willey La-Z-Boy couches and armchairs. Senators spent \$82,000 on 11 works by Utah artists, ranging from \$2,000 to \$30,000 in price. Outside the chambers, the walls are lined with framed portraits of decades of previous Senate presidents.

All of the artwork and much of the furniture will return to the Capitol when it reopens at the end of 2007.

Capitol Curator Judith McConkÃie says senators are thinking strategically about their renovated digs. The Utah Arts Council's collection is tapped for a Main Street museum and other state offices. This way, the Senate will have its own art. "There's just not enough art to go around," McConkÃie said. "These paintings are a 'Who's Who' of Utah artists, both living and deceased. They will hang as long as the Senate is around."

Despite the beauty of new-old furniture and colorful artwork in grand state buildings, Sepp says historical preservation has to be balanced with practicality. "It's important to balance all these factors, not only the functional, but the political," he said. "Many taxpayers might be scratching their heads and doing some comparative math and wondering if it's a good value over the long term."

Curtis acknowledges that some Utahns might look askance at the state spending. But he figures most state leaders and workers are being judicious. "There are obviously some expenses associated with historic restoration. But we don't need to have the latest and greatest electronic gadgets or the most expensive hardwood furniture you can find," Curtis said. "That's not what we should be about."

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. and his staff have limited their spending to about \$3,400 - about half of which was spent to replace an office digital camera that died. The camera is used to record "events," such as bill signings. Huntsman himself sits in former Gov. Cal Rampton's gold leather-upholstered chair, which has a tricky wheel. Rampton ended his three-term tenure in 1977. Huntsman says state employees should be frugal in their spending.

"We're in temporary quarters for the most part. Nobody should be spending much of anything," Huntsman said, noting an individual exception for workers like Pignanelli with chronic back problems. "I have back problems, too. But Cal Rampton's chair will have to do."

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